

ADDRESS OF
PRESIDENT TAFT

AT THE DINNER OF THE
LINCOLN CENTENNIAL
ASSOCIATION



SPRINGFIELD, ILL.
FEBRUARY 11, 1911



WASHINGTON
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Gentlemen of the Lincoln Centennial Association and my Fellow Guests:

I consider it a great opportunity to be present as the guest of this association in the city that knew Lincoln intimately and to which the fragrance of his personal memory gives intense local interest. Contemporary judgment of men conspicuous in public life, or in art, or in literature necessarily lacks a sense of proportion, and it is not until the winnowing effect of time has removed the commonplace figures of the drama in which the great man played the leading part, and until distance has obscured the unessential and superficial details of his personality, that the remarkable features of his character stand out, and across the centuries raise him in history above the dead level of his contemporaries.

Lincoln came up from the soil. He was one of the plain people; he lived and dressed and ate and spoke as they did, and in early life seemed to have some of the defects and failings that they had. His superficial exterior was rough and apparently unrefined. He had ambitions as other men. He used and cultivated the art of politics as they did, and it was difficult for those who knew him and who came close to him to realize the greatness of his character and intellect and the other exceptional qualities that differentiated him from his fellows.

Those traits in him which now place him with Washington, and with Washington alone, did not make themselves clearly manifest and were not fully developed until the trials of the four years of our awful Civil War. In that supreme test he threw off such dross as his early life may have shown and the gold of his great character and intellect shone forth in its purity.

Lincoln had been a farmer. He had lived in the humblest home on a farm; had visited New Orleans on a flatboat; had conducted a country store and educated himself; had studied law and practiced it; had been in the legislature; had been once in Congress; and had lived all the time the life of the plain

people. He had taken part in the greatest debate of the last or any other century on the slavery question, had been defeated for the Senate, which was the immediate prize of the contest, and then, without any executive or administrative experience whatever, was thrust into an office requiring in the successful discharge of its duties the highest ability in selecting subordinates, the keenest political sense and shrewdness, in order to secure unity of support in the loyal States, a familiarity with military strategy and with the organization of military resources, and a patience and long-suffering kindness that has no superior that I know of save in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Lincoln's intellectual honesty and his sympathetic, human heart were his two great and highest attributes, because from them flowed all his other qualities. From boyhood he had trained his reasoning faculty, from boyhood he had practiced simplicity of style and direct statement. His words were short and Anglo-Saxon in derivation, and the simplicity of his sentences harmonized with the lucidity and clearness of his thought. No one could be severer with another than he was with himself in reasoning to a conclusion. He made no argument and stated no proposition until he had worked it out pro and con in his own mind, and what he wrote or spoke had a most convincing quality. He was introspective and was severe in his self-judgment. His readers or hearers saw in his treatment of his subjects no disposition to keep out of sight any formidable obstruction in the flow of reasoning to his conclusion. He hunted for opposing arguments and stated them with even more force than did his opponents before he demolished them. He captivated his audience with his fairness, and with simple words led them along the path he had led himself in finding the truth.

I can not pass this distinguishing and most remarkable trait in his character without saying that in my opinion Lincoln would have made as great a Chief Justice as he made a President. But in the crisis in the nation's history through which he lived, the quality was more necessary even in the executive than in the judicial branch of the Government.

His style was not only suited to the clearness of his thought, but it was biblical in its force, and when his whole nature was roused, as in his second inaugural address, it was as exalted as that of the psalmist or one of the prophets. This disposition to search himself, this judicial attitude on every matter gave him clearness of perception and enabled him to judge other men and their probable actions with the certainty of a seer. His power of observation and his wide acquaintance with the com-

mon man and the practice of putting himself in another's place, gave him the so-called common sense and shrewdness in reading human nature for which he was noted.

He cherished no resentments. He was meek and lowly in weighing his qualifications to meet the problems set before him by the war, and he was patient beyond belief with the men whom he thought to be the necessary instruments in accomplishing the Nation's good. He had a simple dignity as President quite equal to the needs of the office, but he sank personal vanity and repressed his natural indignation at studied insults of his subordinates when it seemed wise to do so in his country's interest. The trials he had with Seward, and Chase, and Stanton, and Fremont, and McClellan, and with the extreme abolitionists no one can realize until he reads the contemporaneous correspondence of Lincoln and notes how everything that Lincoln said and did and refrained from saying was actuated by the purest patriotic motives and a desire to bring a united country to peace.

Lincoln had to go down through the valley of the shadow of popular denunciation and popular distrust. He had to bear the bitterest ridicule, the most contemptuous criticism, and accusations of the meanest motives. He had to see small demagogues exalted in the popular mind at the expense of his own standing and of his own reputation. For months and years he had to strengthen himself with the thought that he alone understood the problems that he was working out; that he alone had the necessary clearness of vision to see far beyond the present and secure the Nation's salvation at the expense of popular misunderstanding and partisan attack. But, fortunately, he lived through these trials and his martyr's death did not come until after the people knew of his patience, his sacrifice, his great qualities of heart and mind, his patriotism, and his far-sighted statesmanship. And the generations that have followed and will follow him, even those whose ancestors were in conflict with him, will give him a higher and higher place in the history of the world.

I count it great good fortune which brings me here to this home of Lincoln to meet men now venerable who knew him as neighbor and friend during 25 years of his life. I doubt not as the time has passed they, too, have experienced a change in their estimate of the man. He was too great a man to be properly measured in the nearness of social intercourse and the comradeship of neighbors.

Fifty years ago to-day he set out from Springfield and delivered that simple but eloquent farewell in which he intimated

a doubt as to whether he ever might again be permitted to return, but expressed his great confidence that with the aid of God he would be permitted to solve the awful and tremendous problems that faced him.

My last official act before leaving Washington was to sign a bill appointing a permanent commission of the Chief Executive, three Members from the House, and three Members from the Senate to determine a proper memorial in Washington to the memory of Lincoln and to expend \$2,000,000 for the purpose. The passage of this bill is largely due to your distinguished and venerable Senator Cullom, the personal friend of Lincoln, whose necessary absence this evening we all deplore. I sincerely hope that with the aid of the present National Art Commission and inspired by the zeal that love of Lincoln's memory prompts in every heart, the commission shall find an appropriate national expression of the love and gratitude of the country toward her greatest son.



